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25 Feb 2018 06:25AM  
(Updated: 25 Feb 2018 07:50AM)



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## Commentary: The benefits of bilingualism go beyond knowing two languages

Mastering a second language improves your functioning in ways not commonly discussed, says a language expert from NUS.



A man and a child on a beach in Singapore. (Photo: Gaya Chandramohan)

SINGAPORE: While we know that bilingualism helps us to maintain contact with family and our cultural heritage, there are additional lesser known benefits that should convince us of its value.

It is timely to discuss some of these in light of International Mother Tongue Day on Feb 21. For those investing time and effort into bringing up bilingual kids, it can be valuable to consider additional benefits that bilingualism offers.

Researchers have found that learning two languages can greatly enhance our mental development. Indeed, research shows us that bilingualism stimulates mental development in babies, grandparents and everybody in between.

### BETTER FOCUS AND CREATIVITY

Bilingualism improves several important mental functions. For example, research shows us that bilingual experience helps us to rapidly make sense of information.

When given a task where children have to focus on one thing and ignore distracting information, bilingual children have shown themselves to be better at zooming in on the task. When they are asked to shift their focus elsewhere, bilingual children also do this more effectively.

Focusing and shifting attention are critical abilities that go beyond bilingualism: This ability helps us to rapidly learn and process information and function well in school and other learning environments.

In addition, bilingual children show greater mental flexibility. For example, they are advantaged in adapting to new rules and situations. Greater mental flexibility can make also bilingual children more creative. In this way, bilingualism may nurture “mental innovation” in young children.

In other words, bilingual children are able to see the same situation in multiple ways. This capacity for divergent thinking helps bilingual children to solve complex problems. Similarly, when asked to solve problems they have never encountered before, bilingual children outperform their monolingual peers in finding new solutions.

Researchers have shown that these advantages lead to bilingual benefits in academic problem solving, including building mathematics skills.



A screengrab from an MOE video featuring a girl learning her mother tongue so she can communicate with her grandfather.

#### **EASIER TO LEARN NEW LANGUAGES**

Bilingualism also makes it easier to learn new languages. Researchers have shown that bilingual adults learn new words from a foreign language more efficiently.

However, this language learning advantage doesn't require years of being bilingual. Even bilingual infants demonstrate a greater ability to learn words in a foreign language. While monolingual children lock into one language, bilingual children remain open to language differences. This extended period of openness makes the uptake of new languages easier.

At the other end of our lifespan, bilingual adults also demonstrate healthier mental ageing. For example, bilingualism may delay the onset of memory loss, a devastating symptom of neuro-degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease.

So in addition to stimulating the infant mind, bilingualism also preserves the ageing mind.

(Read: A [commentary](#) on monolingual parents raising their kids to be bilingual.)

#### **BUILD SOCIAL BONDS**

Bilingualism also helps to build social bonds. In addition to opening up a child's world to different language communities, bilingual children think about other people differently compared with monolingual children.

From early childhood, bilingual children have shown improved abilities to take other people's perspectives and communicate the viewpoints of another person.





Children at an MOE Kindergarten in Punggol View. (Photo: MCI)

Researchers in Montreal, Canada have recently discovered that bilingual children befriend others more democratically, resisting some of the “just-like-me” social preferences often evident in children.

Recent research from the National University of Singapore shows that bilingual children demonstrate fewer racial biases than monolingual children. Bilingualism therefore opens up a child’s social world and unlocks early potential for building social connections.

#### **BUILDS THE BRAIN’S EXECUTIVE SYSTEM**

So what is it about bilingualism that leads to all of these benefits? Bilingualism is thought to feed an important part of the mind – the executive system. Often thought of as the CEO of the brain, the executive system enables us to rapidly take in information and make sense of it in a short time.

One part of the executive system – the part that allows us to attend to things flexibly as the situation calls for – seems to grow more rapidly in bilinguals. Bilingual minds have to be flexible as they commit to two languages.

Bilingual minds also have to anticipate when to turn on one language and turn off the other. It is precisely the mental work of bilinguals – going back-and-forth between two languages – that pays mental dividends.

On the face of it, bilingualism can seem like a significant challenge, especially for young children and their parents. It is important to remember that babies are born neither monolingual nor are they born bilingual. They are born ready to learn one or more languages with equal potential.

And the human mind, when placed in a bilingual environment, rises to the occasion and profits from the experience.

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Source: CNA/sl